

# Recent Trends in University Quality Assurance : The Globalization of the Higher Education Marketplace or the Manifestation of Institutional Isomorphism? : Some Preliminary Observations

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# Recent Trends in University Quality Assurance: The Globalization of the Higher Education Marketplace or the Manifestation of Institutional Isomorphism? —Some Preliminary Observations

Patrick Naoya SHORB\*

**Abstract:** This essay is an exploratory review of recent developments in quality assurance (QA) in three of the world's most prominent university systems: China, the United Kingdom and the United States. It will explore recent global trends emphasizing learning and teaching within Higher Education (HE) and discuss the ways they relate to larger trends in globalization. This study will look at the interplay between external and internal factors motivating higher education institutions (HEIs) to improve educational quality. It concludes that the oft-cited reason of neo-liberalistic policies and the integration of the global HE market is only one factor influencing the actions of HE systems worldwide. In many national systems, shared professional values, norms and concerns over reputation appear to have been equally powerful in motivating change. As a result of this institutional isomorphism, it is not inevitable that the current convergence of QA practice will continue. This essay will conclude by discussing the ramifications of other country's QA experience for the future of Japanese HE.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Globalization, Institutional Isomorphism

## I. Global Quality Assurance: A 'Revolution' in Higher Education?

Since the 1990s, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have undergone a "quality revolution" where stakeholders both within and without academia have significantly increased demands upon HEI to deliver satisfactory education outcomes<sup>27)</sup>. In simply acknowledging this fact, however, it is easy to overlook the intrinsic strangeness of this development. Once distinctive national higher education (HE) systems, with their own unique histories, institutions, and circumstances, have in two short decades, adopted strikingly similar institutional goals, organizational forms, and operational practices. Be it in European public research universities, private liberal arts colleges in the United States, or newly formed HEIs in the emerging economies of Asia, "quality assurance" has become enshrined in national level policy and practice. At first glance, this development seems logical. As educational institutions, HEIs *should* aver to provide a minimum level of support for student learning. Likewise, broader trends in globalization predict that, as in other cultural, economic, and intellectual realms,

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exchange and the benchmarking of best practices should occur. Nonetheless, the fact that many widely adopted quality assurance schemes have not empirically demonstrated their learning benefits to students <sup>6,21,24, 32)</sup> does suggest the need to interrogate this globalization narrative further.

What exactly is meant by “quality” and “quality assurance?” Dill and Beerkens have defined HE academic quality as “equivalent to academic standards ... i.e. the knowledge, skills and attitudes achieved by graduates as a result of their academic program or degree” (pg. 342)<sup>10)</sup>. Quality Assurance (QA) then represents a host of mechanisms --managerial, procedural, or pedagogical-- that HEIs and the HE system they inhabit take to “assure” educational standards or expectations are being met. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, QA has focused increasingly upon the “quality” of student learning outcomes and the “quality” of faculty teaching. Such institutional emphases on education “quality” are new. Although HEIs worldwide have long professed a commitment to providing a “quality” education, as late as the 1980s, little systematic effort was made to document and measure such gains in learning. Before the 1990s, quality was assured indirectly. Accreditation and institutional review schemes in the U.S. and elsewhere, generally focused upon HEIs education “inputs” (e.g. ratio of faculty to students, admissions selectivity, institutional spending per student), with little attempt to actually measure direct “outputs” of what student were actually learning <sup>13)</sup>.

Why did this turn towards “quality” happen so suddenly and so universally? The most common explanation is that it coincided with larger trends in globalization and the corresponding hegemony of neoliberal market policies. HE became increasingly learning-centered because the emerging worldwide market of student-consumers demanded that it provide tangible benefits to future career advancement. With this increasing emphasis on the need for HEIs to provide utility to students, HE “quality,” had to demonstrate its educational value through demonstrable learning gains. Older “input” measures were now seen as insufficient as they failed to provide insight into the value-added HE brought to students’ academic, professional and personal growth. At a policy level, input metrics also failed to give a sense of whether a national HE system’s aggregate “return on investment” --i.e. the overall costs vs. benefits provided to its people--was sufficiently aiding a country’s human resources and global competitiveness. A corollary of this market-driven model, therefore, was the heightened role of the State to safeguard the interests of the HE “consumer.” According to this “New Public Management” model, state actors now sought to offset cuts in the public funding of HE, by instead promoting and assuring a viable market capable of rewarding (and punishing) education providers based their institutional effectiveness and educational innovation. Out of a need to assure a more transparent HE market, governments may have “deregulated” HE in terms of reducing their level of direct administrative intervention, but they remained aggressively “evaluative” in holding HEIs’ performance and resource use to account <sup>41,26)</sup>.

Moreover, this neo-liberal view of QA has heightened the need for “quality” evaluations

to become more quantitative, universally comparable, and readily understandable. The older, narrative-based approaches of pre-1990s QA might have once been useful when used in-house among HEI professionals, but they no longer seemed sufficient to a stakeholder audience clamoring for demonstrable evidence of educational effectiveness. To meet these new and, often legally required, data expectations HEIs across the globe have increasingly created, or at least significantly expanded institutional research (IR) offices. Additionally, “quality” has also become implemented at the classroom level through the intensification of faculty development (FD) and quality enhancement schemes. Although often “voluntary” on a system-level, participation has, *de facto*, become semi-compulsory on an institutional level as QA regimes demand concrete evidence of faculty commitment to teaching<sup>25</sup>). Commentators have also noted a recent trend of students exhibiting a distinctly neo-liberal ethos by increasingly conceiving of their education as consumers through the demands of more amenities and a general “educainment” atmosphere marked more by diversion than by real learning<sup>24</sup>).

Yet purely market-driven explanations only go so far in explaining the rapid spread of QA discourse. If individual HEIs were responding to a more smoothly functioning, transparent market, one would expect to see them attempting to establish unique market niches aligned to core competencies. Increased marketization of HE should lead to more diversity of HEI forms. To the contrary, the last two decades has seen global HE markets become more homogeneous as HEIs vie to rise up global ranking tables based on narrowly defined definitions of what HE “excellence” should be. HEI’s trumpeting of their own educational innovation, creativity and disruptiveness notwithstanding, recent history has shown that quality “standards,” has led to greater conformity to benchmarked norms modeled upon the most prestigious and well-established HEIs<sup>44</sup>). One alternative explanation for the recent QA revolution, instead centers around the concept of institutional isomorphism –i.e. the trend towards similar structures among institutions within a given field—as a major factor in explaining the rapid expansion of global HE QA. Emerging from the New Institutionalism theories of the 1980s, institutional isomorphism –particularly its “mimetic” and “normative” sub-versions,<sup>i</sup> seek to understand modern organizational actions through the normative values of that institution’s (as well as that institution’s workers’) symbolic environment. In documenting the isomorphic convergence of same-field organizations, DiMaggio and Powell<sup>11</sup>) noted how this trend arose out of a need among institutional actors to mimic the practices of peer organizations that they deemed more successful. Mimicry was not undertaken, as a neo-liberal/market-driven model would emphasize, to maximize profit or efficiency per se, but in the belief that such modeling would enhance their “legitimacy” to organizational actors and external stakeholders. Similarly, institutions might adopt similar practices or forms because the professionals (e.g. in the case of HEIs, doctoral-holding academics) that dominate their field are themselves subject to the norms and expectations of their own professional communities. Interestingly, institutional isomorphism predicts that in times of crisis and uncertainty, highly stratified and professionalized fields might

actually become more risk-adverse as they seek comfort in acting in “legitimate” and professionally appropriate ways<sup>11)</sup>.

Qiang Zha has already touched upon HE’s isomorphic trends in broad organizational terms, particularly noting its impact on the homogenization of institutional forms and sub-category stratification <sup>44)</sup>; while Qi Li has also noted the particularly pronounced trends of isomorphism in Chinese HE <sup>22)</sup>. Nonetheless, given the highly professionalized and reputation-sensitive nature of HE, understanding the QA revolution through the lens of institutional isomorphism seems a particularly promising way to interpret the actions of the current QA “revolution.” Institutional isomorphism suggests that the rapid, transnational spread of QA was not simply an attempt to make HEI institutions more market-oriented or “effective” but rather an initiative launched by HEI’s themselves to solidify institutional legitimacy in the face of crisis. It also explains why so many of the actual QA mechanisms adopted have emphasized “best practices” over transformative, disruptive innovation. The contingent and collaboratively constructed nature of institutional isomorphism also suggests that the current convergence in QA practice might not be either inevitable or permanent. Depending upon specific trends in national and sector-level HE values, the future of global HE might be more diverse and context-specific than neo-liberal models might predict. The remaining part of the essay will therefore analyze recent engagement with QA by the two most prominent HE systems in the world (as defined by the university ranking agency, Quacquarelli Symonds <sup>30)</sup>) --the United Kingdom, the United States--and the largest system (by student population) of China<sup>46)</sup>. It will explore how the forces of neo-liberal globalization and institutional isomorphism continues to shape them. This essay will conclude with how these overseas examples hold significance for the future of Japanese HE QA.

## II. United Kingdom: Blending Consumer Oriented and Profession-driven QA

The United Kingdom’s experience with QA, at first glance, seems a case example of neo-liberal market forces remaking a national HE system. Through the establishment of the Academic Audit Unit system in the early 1990s, the operationalization of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the 2000s, and the recent implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2017, the trajectory of UK HE has seemingly been a steady progression towards a system dedicated to creating more globally competitive HEIs through the adoption of systemwide mechanisms assessing and publicizing HEIs teaching and learning effectiveness. In rhetoric and specific policies, the “consumerization” of UK HE is hard to deny. Because quality assessments in the UK since the 1990s are publicly available and give straightforward institutional grades on teaching --the current TEF scheme for example give HEIs either a “Gold,” “Silver,” “Bronze” or “Provisional” rating-- an argument could be made that the UK HE marketplace has become significantly more transparent and accountable to the public. The 2017 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), moreover, has

attempted to explicitly reward “successful” HE teaching by loosening restrictions on heretofore government regulated tuition fees <sup>3)</sup>. Further underscoring this marketization, HEIs’ teaching “excellence” were themselves to be partially evaluated by HE “consumers,” through the student evaluations of the National Student Survey. Preliminary discussions by the Conservative government also raised the possibility of creating an instrument that could universally measure HEIs learning gains through a nationwide, standardized, competency test <sup>2)</sup>. This quality emphasis in UK HE fits in with longer-term trends in spending where UK HEIs have steadily devoted more resources towards individual student learning. So-called “Academic Services” at UK HEIs, which includes a wide range of library-information, IT and learning support services, have increased 40% of its share of aggregate UK HEI budget expenditures, going from 6.5% of all spending in 1995 to 9.2% in 2018 (data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency <sup>19, 18)</sup>.

That said, even with this ostensible turn toward a market-oriented model, the actual details of UK QA suggest more complex developments. In the actual ways that UK HE polices itself for quality, the field has come to exhibit the “best-practice” approaches predicted by institutional isomorphism. In contrast to the 1990s, where HE educational “quality” focused on a market-oriented “fitness of purpose” model incentivizing the creation of distinct HEI market niches, the recent emphasis on a “fitness for purpose” approach has privileged benchmarked best-practice “standards” based on the recommendations of field professionals (pg. 87, 153)<sup>7)</sup>. Part of this development is a product of continent-wide trends initiated by the Bologna Process of 1999. Under this new framework, European HE advanced a new understanding of “quality” based on expert, “university driven” criteria that rationalized degree articulation and program equivalence, and created new subject-standards through the European “Tuning” Studies of the 2000s (pg. 9) <sup>16)</sup>. Through the UK’s independently-run (though HEI-funded) Quality Assurance Agency, for example, external quality assurance visits –carried out by HE faculty and staff-- were routinized in the early 2000s <sup>7)</sup>. Equally important, the criteria upon which these visits evaluated HEIs were set by a new Quality Code (established in 2012), which promulgated program-specific “subject benchmark statements” that further formalized UK HE faculty’s place in setting standards within their own fields of specialty <sup>31)</sup>. Far from disrupting established HE hierarchies and patterns of practice, these QA developments allowed prominent academics and institutions to further consolidate their nationwide authority. Along these lines, the TEF --a government scheme ostensibly committed to a disruptive, consumer-focused QA approach-- gave --with only a couple of notable exceptions--the nation’s most prestigious HEIs the highest “silver” and “gold”-level teaching ratings <sup>28)</sup>.

Indeed, evidence suggests that much of the academic staff of UK HEIs have accepted the underlying premises of professionally defined “quality.” Leading HEI professional organizations such as Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals, helped found and support the Higher Education Academy (HEA, formed in 2003, now known as “Advance HE”) to enhance the quality of academic teaching and instruction. Specifically, the HEA has created a quality

enhancement/teacher training scheme -- the so-called Post-graduate Certification in Higher Education (PGCHE) -- that is developed and delivered by HEIs themselves. With coursework equivalent to 50% of a master's degree, UK HE has joined other European systems in formally credentialing and professionalizing HE teaching. According to at least one 2011 survey, the academic staff of UK HEIs seem generally content with this development. Approximately 60% of UK educational development heads, for example, report feeling their "institutional environment" to be "considerably" or "moderately" more favorable to their learning and teaching enhancement efforts than in the past (pg. 18) <sup>20)</sup>.

### III. United States: Undercutting Market-driven QA, Reaffirming Profession-driven QA

In contrast to the modest inroads of market-driven QA in the UK, the discourse of neo-liberal "quality" in the United States was proven even less successful. Although political pressure by both Republican and Democratic administrations have prompted US HE to adopt some of the trappings of neo-liberal "quality" rhetoric, the qualitative, self-study approach of regional accreditation has remained surprisingly resilient. New QA frameworks such as the UK's QAA, HEA and TEF are notable by their absence. Indeed, to the extent that major innovations have taken place in U.S. QA, they have been generated primarily by HE professional organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities, or such charitable organizations such as the Gates Foundation, Pew Charitable Trust or the Carnegie Endowment. While an argument could be made that the latter institutions have different interests than HEIs, the collaborative nature of their relationship has generally made them a force of incremental HE reform, not disruptive innovation. Regardless, despite the fact that few nations have been as loud as the U.S. in professing fealty to market-driven policy solutions, the very passivity of federal and state governments in setting HE standards, has greatly inhibited the emergence of a transparent, value-added referenced market across the nation <sup>9)</sup>.

As a result, attempts by state governments to demand that HEIs demonstrate clear "return on investment" for students, such as through cultivation of marketable job skills, have generally been watered down or coopted by US HEIs. During the early 2000s, for example, education test-making organizations such as the Educational Testing Service, in combination with business-backed education groups such as the Lumina Foundation, tried to impose nationwide direct assessments of college learning. Despite initial successes in developing pilot learning instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment <sup>5)</sup>, their adoption was rejected by most U.S. HEIs. Instead, American universities reframed the quality debate around more qualitative and holistic goals of student "engagement" and "high-impact educational practices." Through the benchmark standards of the AACU's Value Rubric, and the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Plans, US HEIs were generally able to side-step the most comparable, quantitative frameworks of accountability. Attempts by the Bush-administration to create a nationwide database to track HE students' learning outcomes, as well

as encourage the adoption of university-level competency exams such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the development of academic curricula aligned with national and international standards, elicited stiff opposition. US HEI lobby groups alternately characterized administration efforts as “regrettable” and “flawed”<sup>34,1,29</sup>; these recommendations for the most part died on the vine. A more modest attempt by the Obama-government to impose an HEI quality rating scheme publicizing HEI student education outcomes, the “College Scorecard,” was likewise watered down in the face of intense HEI resistance<sup>14</sup>.

In face of this external pressure, US HEIs have proved effective at generating their own ways to define education quality. Education researchers associated with the University of Indiana and UCLA, for example, have developed instruments capable of deflecting public demands for direct, objective measures of college learning through the indirect inventorying of student learning behaviors such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) surveys. In contrast to the UK’s similarly subjective National Student Survey, these tests are contracted by HEIs themselves, so there is no requirement placed upon HEIs to make the results public. These instruments also tend to privilege the educational missions and liberal arts ideals of elite HEIs, by valorizing integrated learning and personal growth as measured by the amount of student engagement and students’ co-curricular, experiential learning. Indeed, despite the persistent calls by the public to reduce HE costs by forcing HEIs to focus on core educational functions, US (public and non-profit private) HEI spending on “Student Services” as a percentage of overall aggregate HEI spending actually rose from 4.5% to 6.7% between 1980-2017 (data from the National Center for Education Statistics<sup>39,40</sup>). Similarly, the most influential ranking table for US HEIs, the *US News and World Report* University Rankings, still privileges “input” over “output” measures in its rankings algorithm. A predominate weight for calculating college “excellence” remains admissions selectivity and resources available per student. Direct learning output indices are limited to 6-year graduation rates and freshman-sophomore retention figures<sup>9</sup>.

Even when US HE has explicitly adopted quality assurance practices, they remain professionally initiated and flexible in implementation. Initiatives such as the practitioner-led Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) might emphasize teaching principles similar to those emphasized in UK PGCHes, but the nature of their delivery remains free-form and un-standardized. The US has no system-wide analogue to the HEA and QAA. Similarly, U.S. tenure decisions might include consideration of faculty attendance of FD events and adoption of teaching best-practices, but few institutions go as far as to place formalized, credentialed weight on such training. Given the continued influence of professional organizations as the AACU, and the unwillingness or inability for state and federal governments to create something more systematic, it is hard to imagine internally initiated quality frameworks being replaced any time soon.

#### **IV. China: Finding the Limits of Externally imposed, Market-oriented QA?**



Despite its different HE context, mainland Chinese HE has also seen a dramatic transformation in its QA practices. Because Chinese HEIs were only allowed to charge tuition in 1997, recent developments in Chinese QA can be considered “market-driven” in the most literal sense. The nation’s 1998 Higher Education Law revision “marketized” Chinese HE by allowing for a rapid diversification of HE institutional types to meet the growing needs of a diversifying economy. In this context, subsequent QA frameworks developed by HE policymakers could be seen as safeguards to protect the interests of a rapidly expanding student-consumer base. It also helped support China’s attempt to develop “world class” quality HEIs consistent with the Jiang regime’s Project 985 initiative <sup>15)</sup>. In 1999, the Instructional Supervisory Panel system was started to provide regular classroom audits of curriculum and teaching practices. This in-house QA scheme among a select group of Chinese HEIs served as a trial-run for later, externally administered quality audits <sup>22)</sup>. Indeed, during that same year, a national level Expert Committee on Undergraduate Education Assessment was established by the government to insure a coordination of quality standards for academic subjects on a national level. This government coordinated system ultimately crystallized around the Quality and Reform of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Project (2003), wherein a newly created Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) was to coordinate comprehensive institution-level site visits to assure and improve HEI-level teaching <sup>15)</sup>.

Although the formation of China’s QA occurred almost simultaneously with the emergence of new QA practices in the UK and the US, important differences between the approaches were visible from the outset. To an extent not seen in other HE systems discussed, Chinese QA has maintained a more abiding commitment to external mechanisms to insure market-oriented accountability <sup>23)</sup>. In contrast to UK and US approaches, the Chinese QA regime is more comparative, quantitative, and higher stakes. While external U.S. assessment regimes evaluate HEI teaching and learning components on a pass-fail basis with narrative feedback, Chinese QA assessments in the early 2000s evaluated teaching on a 4-level (“Excellent,” “Good,” “Pass” and “Fail”) grading scale; where such grades were often directly to teacher pay and institutional resource allocation. This new scheme has also been augmented by publicized teaching competitions and learning innovation contests at the provincial and national level. Student learning is also directly evaluated through external assessments of randomly sampled student capstone projects as well as indirectly through the administration of student course surveys <sup>22,15)</sup>. Put in a positive light, Chinese HE’s commitment to intensively rank and grade Chinese HEI teaching has provided useful information to discerning consumers, and by extension, provided HEIs with direct motivation to increase teaching quality.

Looked at in a more critical light, however, the dominance of external stakeholders in Chinese QA also means more direct intervention by the government and Chinese Communist Party. The HEEC might resemble the QAA or the regional accreditation bodies of the U.S. in its functions, but it is also guided by the concerns of the government and party at the national and

provincial level. As some scholars have noted, although the overall role of government and Party has explicitly decreased over HEIs in realms of teaching curriculum and content; the so-called “dual structure” of university governance centered around the University President and campus Party Secretary continues to assure sizable Party influence, particularly on questions regarding political ideology. Similarly, the Ministry of Education, with its Academic Degree Committee of the State Council continues to issue the general guidelines on academic programs that individual faculty are expected to reference <sup>17)</sup>. The high-pressure, summative nature of the Chinese external QA process has also led to more prosaic problems. Scholars have noted that the strong link between the results of the external quality visits and later resource allocations incentivize a gaming of the system that leads to fraud, deception and manipulation <sup>22,23)</sup>. Equally deleterious long-term is the way that the current QA assessment scheme valorizes elite HE institutional patterns, thus creating a “one size fits all” approach that is stifling diversification and innovation. As the QA structure remains an extension of state authority, its inherently hierarchical nature is also arguably inimical to the collegial culture of shared best-practices needed to improve teaching <sup>22)</sup>.

Nonetheless, one must be careful not to dismiss the internal, isomorphic tendencies of Chinese QA completely. While it is true that the state and the party exert preeminent influence over QA processes on paper; Chinese academics’ engagement with colleagues worldwide insures that Chinese HE remain aware of the latest in international teaching and learning best practices. Chinese HE, for example, has been as active as any HE system in participating in active learning and project-based pedagogy trends, the introduction of classroom learning technologies, and the incorporation of outcomes-based curriculum and program design <sup>42,37)</sup>. Indeed, in pre-professional fields such as Business and Architecture, some Chinese HEIs have aggressively integrated the standards and best practices of leading international accreditation bodies such as the AACSB or RIBA, respectively <sup>45,35)</sup>. Likewise, faculty who participated in the first cycle of the Higher Education Evaluation Center quality audits, reported –particularly among non-elite universities-- greater campus-wide understanding of teaching practice and professional teaching standards. The longer-term challenge, however, remains how Chinese HEIs can sustain current efforts in the face of the widespread expense of QA activities and lingering concern over the practical problems of implementation <sup>23,15)</sup>.

## V. Conclusion: Charting Japan’s course in Quality Assurance

What are the ramifications of the QA experiences of China, the US and the UK on Japanese HE? On the one hand, Japanese HE has long based its HEI practices on the U.S. Since the end of World War II, Japan has adopted a liberal arts model in its overall institutional organization, and, more recently it has incorporated a peer-reviewed, self-study QA approach modeled upon the U.S. regional accreditation process as well as the “voluntary” American Faculty Development model for its quality enhancement. Yet the professionally dominated,

norm-driven context of American QA differs in several important ways from the situation in Japan. Unlike in the U.S., the Japanese government, specifically the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), exercises a significant leadership role in the direction of HE practices. MEXT, for example, has identified the development of global human resources, and by extension, Japan's overall "competitiveness" as an urgent strategic issue for the HE system <sup>43)</sup>. As a result, the Ministry has felt justified in unilaterally changing the terms of the debate over HE policy, even in the face of professional resistance within Japanese HEIs. In 2004, for example, MEXT signaled the current shift to a "market-based" HE system by forcing national universities to incorporate and become "independent" entities that would have their public funding significantly slashed --even as *de facto* government supervision over the sector still remained significant <sup>8)</sup>.

On a demographic level as well, Japanese HEIs have been forced to adopt to a more "market-based" reality due the nation's low birth-rate. As many as 40% of Japanese HEIs are projected to go bankrupt or merge in the next few decades (*cf.* 25,33). Given this grim reality, it is not surprising that much of the public has come to accept that market forces should be allowed to reduce existing HEIs based on the effectiveness of HEI education quality. Regardless, output measures of student learning have become widely incorporated and valorized by the Japanese public when evaluating HEI quality. The Japanese version of the Times Higher Education University ranking --increasingly, the most influential ranking system in Japanese HEI-- for example, explicitly rewards HEIs for performance on several "outcome" measures, including HEI courses' ability to develop students' critical thinking, ability to work well in groups and an HEI's overall ability to deliver a useful and satisfying educational experience <sup>36)</sup>. Other influential ranking systems also measure how effective HEIs are at placing graduates at top companies or government positions <sup>38)</sup>. The government has likewise tried to "reinforce" market forces by rewarding innovative HEIs. Through competitive grants such as the Global Human Resource Development Project (2011) and the Super-Global University Project (2014), MEXT has consistently encouraged HEIs to experiment with novel pedagogy, learning technology, collaborative learning and co-curricular education. At the same time, MEXT also exerts negative pressure on quality laggards by controlling admissions placement caps of students at individual HEI, thereby limiting public access to underperforming institutions. Through the 2017 requirement that all HEIs develop institutional mission statements that align their "three policies" (specifically that of an HEI's "diploma policy," which enumerates academic program requirements, its "curriculum policy," which specifies an HEI's approach to teaching and learning, and its "admissions policy," which explicates the institution's student recruitment strategy), MEXT has prompted HEIs to reflect more realistically about their potential market niches and strategic use of institutional resources.

As Mulvey and others have already noted <sup>25)</sup>, because Japan has already been moving towards a more structured QA process; it logically follows that Japanese HE rely less on the free-

form U.S. model and instead look elsewhere, such as those of Europe’s QA regimes. Japan’s resurrection of the American-style regional accreditation system in 2005 is particularly perplexing as the U.S. system’s emphasis on deliberate, qualitative self-study seems out of step with the aggressively quantitative and comparative approach MEXT seems to be demanding of HEIs in practice. Likewise, Japan’s adoption of U.S.-styled Faculty Development practices might seem incongruous. While FD might be well suited to an American context where regular participation is already an established part of many faculty cultures, US FD’s *ad-hoc*, and voluntary nature might be too incremental and small-scale for what Japanese HE reformers and public stakeholders are hoping for. By contrast, the UK’s more directive—but still professionally-managed—QA practices in faculty training (PGCE), curriculum design (QAA) and learning assessment (TEF), might promise a more sustained and radical transformation. While such a move might encounter significant short-term resistance from HEIs and faculty; overtime, Japanese HE could revise these frameworks—as has been the case in the UK—into a new set of profession-driven best-practices that will only enhance the longer-term legitimacy of faculty. Otherwise, the current contradictory situation of Japanese QA risks further demoralization and cynicism within the academy. Indeed, according to surveys conducted over the last two decades, the status of teaching at Japanese universities remains one of the lowest in the OECD. Japanese faculty ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> to last among 13 OECD countries when it came to the to their level of “teaching oriented”-ness (pg. 139) <sup>12)</sup>; while Japanese faculty ranked dead last of 17 OECD countries when it came to perceptions of institutional support for such teaching (pg. 133) <sup>4)</sup>.

Over the last two decades, QA processes around the world have evolved many striking similarities to each other. In the case of the UK, the US, China and Japan, all four systems have adopted extensive faculty training-development programs, outcomes-based approaches to curriculum/program development, and comprehensive assessment regimes gauging student education outcomes. This rapid and broad transformation of global QA could be considered revolutionary, but within this seeming convergence of QA forms, there remain important differences that suggest that such convergent practice might not endure in the coming decades.

With the UK, the new QA framework has arguably created a system more responsive to external stakeholder needs. At the same time, this emphasis on market-based considerations has simultaneously become augmented by professionally driven best practices and norms. Longer term, the emergence of these professional standards could find an equilibrium that will complement, not replace, preexisting practices. Meanwhile, the US, despite the popular rhetoric emphasizing the importance of the market in HE, ironically seems poised to undergo the least dramatic transformation in the coming decades. As noted above, US HEIs have proven quite effective in undercutting external interventions by government, business and the public on issues related to teaching and learning practices. Regional accreditation agencies might institute a few limited reforms, but the overall pace and nature of change appears remain at the initiative of

HEIs themselves. Finally, with China, the need to develop a properly functioning HE consumer market—in concert with ongoing supervision by the state and CCP—suggests that QA concerns external to HEIs will continue to hold disproportionate sway in its future evolution. This might prove beneficial to the extent that HEIs will be responsive to the demands of HE “consumers,” but it might also inhibit the establishment of an internal QA culture.

Japan, in contrast, stands at a crossroads. Although its current policy and recent history draw chiefly from American-centered QA models, the emerging crisis in HE might prompt a broader rethinking of first assumptions. The decentralized, deliberate approach of US QA might no longer be enough to assuage public concerns. As with the UK, China and much of Europe, MEXT and HEIs might increasingly see the need to adopt a more directive and structured QA process. Regardless, without a clearer alignment between its formalized QA framework and the real needs of Japanese HE students and HEIs, deeper cynicism and demoralization within Japanese HE remains a continuing possibility.

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<sup>i</sup>DiMaggio and Powell<sup>11)</sup> identified three types of isomorphisms: “coercive,” “mimetic” and “normative.” Unlike the latter two types, “coercive” isomorphism occurs when the pressure to homogenize comes from external actors that the field is reliant upon. In higher education, the state or the “public” exert such isomorphic effects through regulation or market forces. Because this process overlaps and is often indistinguishable from broader neo-liberal and market-based explanations, it is not treated separately in this essay. In contrast, “mimetic” isomorphism, the process where less prominent organizations model or benchmark their behavior on field leaders, and “normative” isomorphism where institutional norms converge based on the professional values of that fields’ predominant organizational actors, are of interest specifically because they do not always act in concert with market-generated pressures.

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